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ABSTRACT

Every 5 years, Johnson County Community College (JCCC), in Overland Park, Kansas, conducts a study of community perceptions to measure the level of community satisfaction with the overall mission of the college. Specifically, the studies seek to measure constituents' awareness of JCCC's role, their support of the college's activities to fulfill this role, and their perceptions of JCCC's performance. The 1992 study gathered data from 15-minute telephone interviews of 524 randomly selected adults living within the college's service area. Results of the interviews included the following: (1) 92% of the respondents said that they would recommend the college to a friend, 89% thought JCCC was a source of community pride, and 87% said they would encourage their children to attend; (2) the majority of respondents indicated that all of the 12 functions detailed in the college's mission statement were important; (3) the functions deemed to be most important by the majority of respondents were preparation for transfer and development or enhancement of job skills; (4) over 90% of the respondents said they were aware of the colleges' mission to provide noncredit courses for lifelong learning and credit courses for personal development, while only 35% were aware of the goal of supporting businesses and local community groups; (5) while over half of the respondents chose not to evaluate the college's performance, 45.5% thought it successfully prepared students for transfer and 43% thought it successfully provided for personal development and lifelong learning; and (6) while 68% believed the college should acquire new sites to solve current growth problems, only 29% felt that the college should cap or limit enrollment. (MAB)

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Constituent Perceptions of
A Community College: An "Image" Study

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Abstract

This paper describes methodology and results of the most recent of three community perception studies conducted at 5-year intervals by a comprehensive midwestern suburban community college. These studies were designed to answer questions about various facets of the college's mission statement--how aware respondents were of what the college does, whether respondents felt the college should be doing each of these things, and how well they felt the college was accomplishing them. Results of these studies have assisted the college to adjust its mission to meet the dynamic personal and educational needs of its constituency and, as such, should be of interest to all college and university personnel involved with college planning, evaluation, and decision making.

Constituent Perceptions of a Community College:

An "Image" Study

The decade of the 90s is already fulfilling its promise of being a challenging time for institutions of higher education. In a time of escalating costs and decreased funding, colleges and universities are faced with meeting the diverse needs of a changing population, keeping abreast of rapidly advancing technology in virtually every career field, and preparing graduates to compete in an international marketplace that may conservatively be described as unpredictable at best.

For these and other reasons, it is imperative that colleges and universities engage in a systematic assessment process designed to provide relevant, timely, and usable data from which decisions can be made regarding the institution's effectiveness and its ability to respond to the needs of our changing and dynamic society (Lombardi, 1993). These data can also be used to assist politicians in waging effective legislative battles for appropriations when it can be shown that the public perceives colleges as doing the right thing in a cost-effective, efficient way with high quality.

Assessment of institutional effectiveness has been described as simply a comparison of results achieved to goals intended (Ewell, 1985). An important component of any comprehensive assessment model is the measure of constituent satisfaction with the overall mission of the college, and an efficient way of attaining such a measurement is by conducting a comprehensive community perception study.

The Community Perception Study

Community perception studies answer questions about various facets of the college's mission statement--how aware respondents are of what the college does, whether respondents feel the college should be doing each of these things, and how well they feel the college is accomplishing them. Information on the educational interests and achievements of constituents and the best way to communicate with them about the college may also be collected.

Periodic community perception studies also provide an opportunity to gather information on respondents' opinions of current political or governance issues affecting the college as well as their ideas and concerns about college programs and services. Other components of the overall assessment of institutional effectiveness, such as student and completer surveys, only provide data from current "customers." Community perception studies provide an avenue for collecting information on the needs and future educational plans of those not currently engaged in the educational process, thus assisting the college to remain on the cutting edge of changing societal needs.

The Mission Statement

The principal purpose of community colleges is unquestionably to help students learn and reach their educational objectives (Palmer, 1990). However, those educational objectives have grown increasingly more diverse as the composition of the community college student body has changed. As a result, the institutional mission statement has come under scrutiny

in response to this changing student population, external economic factors, and local community needs (Grossman, 1991).

Recent publications from Macomb County Community College stress that the measurement of institutional effectiveness involves a systematic comparison of organizational purpose and performance (1989). Thus, they recommend that each college should develop a unique mission statement and respond to the changing needs of the community and the marketplace (1990). Periodic community perception studies which explore the awareness, level of importance, and evaluation of each function detailed in a comprehensive mission statement are an essential component of this process.

JCCC Community Perception Studies

The Office of Institutional Research at Johnson County Community College (JCCC), a comprehensive midwestern suburban community college, conducted its first community perception study in 1982. After substantial revisions in both the survey instrument and methodology, a second study was initiated in 1987, and replicated with minor revisions in 1992. Results of these studies have provided an important contribution to the existing body of knowledge on which the college draws when planning to meet the ever-changing educational needs of its constituency, and validates the success of the college in meeting those needs.

Methodology

The 1982 study was conducted by mail, and an independent research firm was hired in both 1987 and 1992 to conduct 15 minute telephone interviews with a random sample of adults living within the college's service area. The primary advantage of telephone surveys

over in-person and mail surveys is the opportunity to monitor and closely control the quality of data collection as it occurs. Currently there are no social or physical barriers that automatically rule out consideration of telephone surveys, and in many instances they are the most cost-effective approach to gathering quality survey data (Lavrakas, 1986).

A briefing session was conducted with all personnel charged with conducting the telephone interviews to insure familiarity with the questionnaire and to review the basics of appropriate telephone interview procedures. Interviewers were especially cautioned not to give either positive or negative feedback for responses, to remain neutral and friendly throughout the interview process, and to record all verbatim comments exactly as stated. They were also reminded not to paraphrase questions under any circumstances. In the event a respondent did not understand a question, the interviewer was cautioned to simply reread the question exactly as written, thus avoiding the possibility of contaminating the data.

Other rules of telephone interviewing reviewed in the briefing session included the suggestion to redial immediately whenever there is no answer, a busy signal, or a recording indicating a disconnected phone to be certain the number had not been misdialed on the first try; to record all appropriate information on the call record for each attempt; and to adhere to skip patterns as each interview progressed. Finally, each interviewer was provided with the name and telephone number of the director of institutional research at the college to be used in the event questions about the legitimacy of the study arose.

Lists of potential respondents, stratified by ZIP code, were purchased from a professional firm for both the 1987 and 1992 study to insure a true random sample of

Johnson County residents age 18 or older and the most current addresses and telephone numbers possible. A sample twice the size of the number of completed interviews desired was utilized, and the list was divided into two groups to maintain the ZIP code stratification in the event the maximum number of interviews were completed before the entire sample had been given the opportunity to respond. List costs vary by region and supplier; in the Greater Kansas City area the price range for a minimum number of names (usually 2,000) is from $150 to $500.

Utilizing an outside interview firm has the distinct advantage of providing specially trained callers to maximize efficiency and accuracy. The number of completed interviews for both projects was primarily determined by the dollars allocated to the project. In 1987 sufficient funds were available to draw a sample of 1,600 which resulted in 823 completed interviews at a cost of $6,122. In 1992, interview costs had to be confined to a maximum of $3,500, and the sample was adjusted accordingly. Of the 800 randomly selected adults included in the 1992 sample, 139 were not familiar enough with the college to complete the interview and 137 refused, resulting in 524 completed surveys.

Results and Conclusions

The results confirmed the belief that more residents were coming to the college in 1992 than in 1987 to take advantage of a variety of services offered, enjoy the facilities, or attend events. A pleasant surprise was the realization that the college's image had been enhanced over the past 5 years despite a difficult economic climate and numerous problems associated with a 70% overall increase in enrollment.

The college's image was measured by responses to questions indicating how much respondents agreed that the college was a source of community pride, should strive to become recognized as one of the best community colleges in the country, was conveniently located, provided adequate programs and services at conveniently scheduled times and locations, was a good value to students and to taxpayers, and whether respondents would recommend the college to friends or encourage their own children to attend JCCC. Respondents were also asked to rate JCCC in terms of expectations for institutions of higher education. Of note is the low percentage of negative responses to any of these questions. See Table 1.

Insert Table 1

The majority of respondents indicated all of the 12 functions detailed in the mission statement were important for the college to perform. It was most gratifying to the college to have this validation of their mission, and helpful for future planning and decision making to have an indication of how important each function was perceived to be. See Table 2.

Insert Table 2

The functions deemed to be <u>most</u> important by the majority of respondents (a new question added in 1992) were preparation for transfer and development or enhancement of job skills. Approximately one in five respondents also considered opportunities for lifetime

learning, support services, cultural activities, and programs and services designed to meet the needs of special populations among the most important functions performed by the college.

It was somewhat disconcerting to realize that the majority of respondents were unaware of three of the 12 functions the college performs. However, the vast majority of respondents who were aware of the college's role in performing each of the 12 functions detailed in the mission statement and chose to evaluate the college's performance felt the college had done well in accomplishing them. See Tables 3 and 4.

Insert Tables 3 and 4

These results not only served to validate the efficacy of the current mission statement, but provided solid data substantiating the college's position on governance issues as well. Respondents were strongly supportive of maintaining local control rather than being placed under the State Board of Regents, an issue currently being debated in the state legislature. Furthermore, three questions exploring respondent preferences for solutions to the college's rapid growth elicited useful responses to guide the Board of Trustees. Fully 68% agreed that the college should acquire additional sites to solve problems of rapid growth, and nearly one in two indicated they would support acquisition of an additional campus through a property tax increase. However, only 29% felt that the college should cap or limit enrollment to solve problems of rapid growth.

Implications for Practice

The community perception studies described herein serve useful functions on a variety of levels. Obviously, they indicate that the college's mission is being fulfilled as JCCC strives to meet the various educational and cultural needs of the community. Additionally, the college's marketing efforts were enhanced as a result of findings from the community perception study. Selected findings were incorporated into promotional materials, and the newspapers, radio stations, and TV channels most often accessed were targeted for college advertisements.

Perhaps of most importance, these community perception surveys provided an opportunity for respondents to express their opinions and suggestions, thus assisting the college to remain abreast of the educational needs of an ever-changing constituency while sending a clear message to constituents that the college was interested in their views.

Assessment should never be undertaken for its own sake, or simply to satisfy regional accreditation requirements or state governing boards (Seybert, 1993). To be of most benefit, community perception surveys must be customized to reflect the current educational, social, and political considerations of the college or university conducting them. The design of the study should include input from members of the faculty, staff, administration, and governing board, and include a plan for appropriate utilization of findings. The ultimate goal of assessment must be program improvement, which will justify the considerable personnel and resource costs required to mount effective assessment efforts.

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Table 1

Community Perceptions of JCCC

Item	Responses (n=523)			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Unknown
Would recommend JCCC to friends	92.4%	2.5%	1.1%	4.0%
Is source of community pride	88.9	5.7	0.4	5.0
Would encourage own children to attend	87.2	4.4	3.8	4.6
Should strive to become one of the best	86.7	5.5	2.3	5.5
Is conveniently located	86.0	5.4	4.6	4.0
Would rate excellent or good in terms of expectations for higher education	85.3	5.9	0.2	8.6
Provides good value to students	70.7	2.9	0.4	26.0
Provides good value to taxpayers	66.7	7.7	2.7	22.9
Provides adequate programs and services at convenient times	62.1	6.6	1.5	29.8
Charges reasonable tuition and fees	58.3	4.1	1.5	36.1

Note. Responses of "yes/undecided/no" were elicited for the items concerning recommending JCCC to friends or encouraging their own children to attend JCCC. The remainder of data were collected on 5-point scales ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" or "excellent" to "poor." Positive responses reflect "strongly agree/somewhat agree" or "excellent/good" responses combined, and negative responses reflect "somewhat disagree/strongly disagree" or "fair/poor" responses combined.

Table 2

Perceived Importance of JCCC Functions

Item	Responses (n=523) Positive	Neutral	Negative	Unknown
Prepare students to transfer	96.0%	1.0%	0.0%	3.0%
Provide support services	94.1	2.1	0.4	3.4
Provide instruction to update job skills	94.1	4.0	0.4	1.5
Provide instruction to prepare for new jobs	92.0	4.1	1.0	2.9
Provide programs/services for special clientele	90.4	5.0	1.1	3.4
Provide credit courses for personal development	89.5	7.5	1.1	1.9
Provide noncredit courses for lifelong learning	85.1	10.7	1.9	2.3
Provide cultural programs/services	77.6	13.0	4.4	5.0
Sponsor student activities	76.5	16.6	2.7	4.2
Provide programs/services for economic dev.	75.5	13.8	2.9	7.8
Provide local and state educational leadership	67.1	14.0	2.7	16.3
Support business, individuals & community groups	66.7	18.0	4.2	11.1

Note. Data were collected utilizing a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Positive responses reflect "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" responses combined, and negative responses reflect "somewhat disagree and "strongly disagree" responses combined.

Table 3

Awareness of JCCC Functions

Item	Responses (n=523) Aware	Unaware	Unknown
Prepare students to transfer	90.6%	8.6%	0.8%
Provide noncredit courses for lifelong learning	90.4	8.6	1.0
Provide credit courses for personal development	90.2	8.8	1.0
Provide instruction to prepare for new jobs	86.6	13.0	0.4
Provide cultural programs/services	81.5	16.3	2.2
Sponsor student activities	79.3	18.5	2.2
Provide instruction to update job skills	78.2	21.2	0.6
Provide support services	75.9	22.6	1.5
Provide programs/services for special clientele	55.3	43.2	1.5
Provide programs/services for economic dev.	39.0	59.5	1.5
Support business, individuals & community groups	35.4	62.3	2.3
Provide local and state educational leadership	28.5	69.0	2.5

Table 4

Evaluation of JCCC Functions

Item	Responses (n=523) Positive	Neutral	Negative	Unknown
Prepare students to transfer	45.5%	2.5%	1.3%	50.7%
Provide credit courses for personal development	43.8	3.4	0.2	52.6
Provide noncredit courses for lifelong learning	43.6	4.4	0.4	51.6
Provide cultural programs/activities	40.5	4.2	0.4	54.9
Provide instruction to prepare for new jobs	30.2	2.9	0.2	66.7
Sponsor student activities	28.3	4.7	1.0	66.0
Provide instruction to update job skills	27.3	3.8	0.6	68.3
Provide support services	26.2	4.4	1.3	68.1
Provide programs/services for special clientele	22.4	2.6	0.2	74.8
Provide programs/services for economic dev.	16.4	2.7	0.8	80.1
Support business, individuals & community groups	14.0	3.8	0.6	81.6
Provide local and state educational leadership	11.9	1.5	0.4	86.2

Note. Data were collected utilizing a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Positive responses reflect "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" responses combined, and negative responses reflect "somewhat disagree and "strongly disagree" responses combined.